DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 354 IR 050 224

AUTHOR	Boorstin, Daniel J.
TITLE	Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information? The Center for the Book Viewpoint Series No. 3.
INSTITUTION	Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO	ISBN-0-8444-0346-6
PUB DATE	19 Nov 79
NOTE	10p.; Remarks at the White House Conference on Library and Information Services (Washington, DC, November 19, 1979).
AVAILABLE FROM	Information Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Books; *Information Services; *Libraries; *Library Role
IDENTIFIERS	*Information Industry; *Knowledge

ABSTRACT

There is a distinction to be made between knowledge and information. Knowledge is orderly and cumulative; information is random and miscellaneous and may be collected simply because it is there. The information industry is flourishing, but knowledge institutions--colleges, universities, and libraries--go begging. The knowledge industry is actually being transformed and to some extent displaced by the information industry. Libraries must make use of computer technology, but they must also remain fortresses of knowledge which is still preserved mainly in books. Similarly, libraries must be repositories of information, but also places of refuge from the tidal waves of information--and misinformation. The autonomous reader, amusing and "knowledging" himself, should be the be-all and end-all of libraries. (A brief description of the Center for the Book, in the Library of Congress, prefaces the pamphlet). (ESR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED231354

Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information?

Daniel J. Boorstin, The Librarian of Congress

Remarks at the White House Conference on Library and Information Services

Washington, November 19, 1979

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

IR050224

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS · WASHINGTON

MCMLXXX

The Center for the Book
Viewpoint Series
No. 3

This booklet is printed on permanent/durable paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:

Boorstin, Daniel Joseph, 1914–
Gresham's law : knowledge or information?
(Viewpoint series ; no. 3)
Sponsored by Center for the Book.

1. Books—Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Libraries—Addresses, essays, lectures.
3. Information storage and retrieval systems—Addresses, essays, lectures.
1. Center for the Book.
II. Title.
III. Series : Viewpoint series (Washington, D.C.); no. 3.

Z4.B7 002 80-19198
ISBN 0-8444-0346-6

THE CENTER FOR THE BOOK in the Library of Congress is pleased to present the remarks of Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin on November 19, 1979, before the delegates to the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

"To keep the book flourishing" is, the Librarian says in these remarks, the purpose of the Center for the Book. Established in October 1977 by Public Law 95-129, the Center endeavors to stimulate interest in books, reading, and the printed word. Drawing on the resources of the Library of Congress, it works closely with many organizations to explore important issues in the book and educational communities, to encourage reading, & to encourage research. Its goal is to serve as a useful catalyst among authors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, educators, scholars, and readers. *The Center's program and publications are supported by gifts from individuals and organizations. Contributions are tax deductible.*

Proposals for lectures, seminars, & research projects are welcome. The interests of the Center for the Book include the educational and cultural role of the book, nationally & internationally; the history of books & printing; the future of the book, especially as it relates to new technologies & other media; authorship & writing; the printing, publishing, care, & preservation of books; access to & use of books & printed materials; reading; and literacy.

Seminar proceedings and lectures are published and disseminated as widely as possible. Publications sponsored by the Center for the Book may be ordered prepaid from the Information Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.

JOHN Y. COLE
Executive Director of the Center for the Book

AS THE LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS I speak for a national fortress of knowledge. In other words, I speak for a library, and for libraries. Our relentless Jeffersonian quest tempts us to believe that all technologies (& perhaps, too, all ideas) are created equal. This favored axiom is only slightly clouded by another axiom, equally American. For we have a touching national belief in annual models. In our national lexicon, "newer" is a synonym for "better." The result is illustrated in the title—and I suspect, too, in the preoccupations—of this conference. Libraries (or as you say "library services") are here equated with "information services," which is perilously close to saying that knowledge can or should be equated with information.

In these remarks I would like to focus your attention on the distinction between knowledge and information, the importance of the distinction, and the dangers of failing to recognize it. You have a hint of my theme in the melodramatic difference today between the condition of our knowledge-institutions and our information-institutions. The last two decades have seen the spectacular growth of the information industry. We are exhilarated by this example of American ingenuity and enterprise—the frontier spirit in the late twentieth century. A magic computer technology now accomplishes the dreariest tasks in seconds, surpasses the accuracy of the human brain, controls production lines & refineries, arranges inventories, and retrieves records. All this makes us proud of the human imagination.

All this, too, I am glad to say, has produced a widening unpredicted world of profit & employment. The information industry, we are happy to note, is flourishing. It is a growth industry. It enjoys the accelerating momentum of technology & the full vitality of the marketplace. The information industries are a whole new world of business celeb-

rity. The jargon of the stock exchange accurately describes theirs as "glamour" stocks. Their leaders hold the national spotlight, and with good reason. The President of the United States appoints the head of one of the greatest of these companies to be perhaps our most important ambassador—to the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, what has become of our knowledge-institutions? They do not deal mainly in the storage and retrieval of information, nor in the instant flow of today's facts & figures which will be displaced by tomorrow's reports and bulletins. Rather, they deal in the enduring treasure of our whole human past. They include our colleges and our universities—and, of course, our libraries. While the information industry flourishes and seeks new avenues of growth, while people compete to buy into them, our knowledge-institutions go begging.

Knowledge-institutions do not pay the kind of dividends that are reflected on the stock market. They are sometimes called "philanthropic," which means that they profit nobody except everybody and their dividends go to the whole community. These knowledge-institutions —and especially our public libraries—ask charity, the community's small change, just to keep their heat and their lights on, and to keep their unrenovated doors open. We, the knowledge-institutions, are the poor relations. We anxiously solicit, and gratefully acknowledge, the crumbs. Today I would like to put into historical perspective the distinction between knowledge and information. For it is especially appropriate in this White House Conference that we should focus on the distinction.

In my lifetime we have moved from an Age of Publishing into our Age of Broadcasting. In that Age of Publishing started by Gutenberg, printed materials (bearing the community's memory, wisdom, literary imagination, and knowledge) were, of course, widely diffused. The great vehicle was the book. Knowledge was thought to be cumulative. The new books did not displace the old. When today's books arrived people did not throw away yesterday's—as if they were newspapers or out-of-date information bulletins. On the contrary, the passing years gave a new vitality to the books of past centuries.

We too easily forget that the printed book, too, was a triumph of technology. The dead could now speak, not only to the select few who could afford a manuscript book but to thousands at home, in schools, and in libraries everywhere. The very words of Homer, Plato, Machiavelli, and Dickens now could reach everybody. Books became the carriers and the record—also the catalyst and the incentive—for most of the knowledge, the amusement, and the sacred visions of the human race. The printed book has given all humanity its inexpensive, speedy, reliable vehicles across the centuries. Books have conquered time.

But the peculiar, magic vehicles of our age conquer space. The tube makes us constant eyewitnesses of riots in Iran, airplane wrecks in India, children starving in Cambodia, and guerrilla attacks in Rhodesia. Along, of course, with an ever-flowing current of entertainment programs. Yet the special commodity of our electronic Age of Broadcasting is *Information*—in all its amplitude, in all its formats.

While knowledge is orderly & cumulative, information is random & miscellaneous. We are flooded by messages from the instant-everywhere in excruciating profusion. In our ironic twentieth-century version of Gresham's law, information tends to drive knowledge out of circulation. The oldest, the established, the cumulative, is displaced by the most recent, the most problematic. The latest information on anything and everything is collected, diffused, received, stored, and retrieved before anyone can discover whether the facts have meaning.

A mountain-climbing syndrome rules us. Information is gathered simply because it is there. Electronic devices for diffusion, storage, & retrieval are used, simply because they too are there. Otherwise, the investment would seem wasted! I am not complaining. On the contrary, I am charmed and amazed. For so much of human progress has come from people playing enthusiastically with their new technologic toys—with results that are astonishing, and often productive.

Whatever the motive, we see the knowledge industry being transformed, and even to some extent displaced, by an information industry. In the schoolroom, history tends to be displaced by current events. The resources of science & literature are overwhelmed and diluted by

multiplying journals, by loose-leaf services, by preprints, and by information stored in computers, quickly & conveniently modified, and instantly retrievable.

To the ancient question, "What is truth?" we Americans now reply, "Sorry, I haven't seen the seven o'clock news!"

What does all this mean for the world of knowledge, which is also, of course, the world of libraries? It should be plainer than ever that our libraries are needed to keep civilization in perspective. The more electronic our society becomes, the more urgent it is that we have prosperous knowledge-institutions. Yet this urgency is less noted every year. If you consult the authoritative *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, published in 1933, & look under "Libraries" you will be referred to "Public Libraries" where you find an extensive article. But if you consult its successor, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, published in 1968, and look for an entry for "Libraries" you will find no article. Instead there's a cross-reference which says "See under Information and Storage and Retrieval."

The fashionable chronologic myopia of our time tempts enthusiasts to forget the main and proper mission of our libraries. "Libraries have been selling the wrong product for years," one such faddist exclaims. "They have been emphasizing reading. The product that we have is information." But these are false messiahs. Of course, we must use computer technology and enlist the whole information industry. At the Library of Congress we have tried to be a leader in exploring its uses and in extending its applications. We will continue to do so.

In the long run, however, we will serve neither the information industry nor our civilization, if we encourage extravagant or misplaced expectations for the role of information or the devices which serve it up. We must never forget that our libraries are our fortresses of knowledge. If we allow these rich resources, still preserved mainly in books, to be displaced by the latest thing, by today's news & journals & preprints & loose-leaf services & telephone conversations & currently revised printouts, we will isolate the world of scholarship from the world of libraries. To avoid such dangers as these we have established in the

Library of Congress a Center for the Book, to use old & find new ways to keep the book flourishing, to keep people reading books, and to enlist other media to promote reading. One such project, "Read More About It," with the enthusiastic collaboration of CBS, the other night after the showing of "All Quiet on the Western Front" brought our suggested reading list to some 31 million viewers. We must and will do more of this.

If librarians cease to be scholars in order to become computer experts, scholars will cease to feel at home in our libraries. And then our whole citizenry will find that our libraries add little to their view of the world, but merely reinforce the pressures of the imperial instant-everywhere. To enlist scholars more actively & more intimately in the activities of the Library of Congress, we are now setting up in the Library a Council of Scholars. They will help us discover the needs of the scholarly world and will help us provide an ongoing inventory of the state of our knowledge—and of our ignorance.

A great civilization needs many and varied resources. In our time our libraries have two paradoxical & sometimes conflicting roles. Of course we must be repositories of information. But somehow we must also remain places of refuge from the tidal waves of information—and misinformation. Our libraries must be conspicuously the treasuries of news that stays news.

The era of the Enlightenment, the later eighteenth century, the age of Franklin & Jefferson, the founding epoch of our nation, was an Age of Publishing. That age has left us a happy phrase. They said that people should read for "*Amusement and Instruction.*" This was why they read the poetry of Dryden and Pope, the philosophy of Hume, the history of Gibbon, and the novels of Sterne and Fielding. The two delights, "amusement" and "instruction," were inseparable. The book was the prototypical provider of both. A person who was "a-mused" (from Latin "muser," to idle or to pass the time) was engaged in a quite autonomous activity—set off by a catalyst, in the form of a book. In those days book publishing was an "amusement industry."

Today in an Age of Broadcasting "entertainment" tends to displace

"amusement." While we once had to amuse ourselves, we now expect to *be* entertained. The program *is* the entertainment. The amusement is in *us*. But others can and must be our entertainers. Now, of course, there is a flourishing "entertainment industry." We generally do not consider book publishing to be part of it.

This is something to reflect on. It is another clue to our special need for libraries. The more omnipresent is the industry that tries to entertain us, the more we need libraries—where pleasure & amusement are found by the free and active spirit.

It is a cliché of our time that what this nation needs is an "informed citizenry." By which we mean a citizenry that is up on the latest information, that has not failed to read this week's newsmagazine, today's newspapers, or to watch the seven o'clock news (perhaps also the news at ten o'clock!)—always for more information, always to be better informed.

I wonder if that is what we need. I suggest, rather, that what we need—what any free country needs—is a *knowledgeable* citizenry. Information, like entertainment, is something someone else provides us. It really is a "service"! We expect to be entertained, & also to be informed. *But we cannot be knowledged!* We must all acquire knowledge for ourselves. Knowledge comes from the free mind foraging in the rich pastures of the whole everywhere-past. It comes from finding order and meaning in the whole human experience. The autonomous reader, amusing & knowledging himself, is the be-all and end-all of our libraries.